

Killer Whale Questions & Answers

Are there different kinds of killer whales in Puget Sound?

All killer whales are members of the toothed whale family and belong to the same genus and species, *Orcinus orca*. However, there are two forms of killer whale found in Puget Sound, called residents and transients. Some taxonomists (scientists who study the relationships within and between species) believe that some differences between forms of killer whales may be great enough to further sub-divide the species.

How are transient killer whales and resident killer whales different?

As the terms transient and resident imply, the two forms of killer whales have different behavior and movement patterns, but both forms can be found seasonally in Puget Sound. Transient killer whales travel in smaller groups (called pods) and hunt other marine mammals for food. Resident killer whales spend more time in the Sound, travel in larger pods and eat mostly fish.

What is a southern resident killer whale and are there resident killer whales in other places?

Southern resident killer whales are fish-eating killer whales with a seasonal (summer) home range that includes Washington and southern British Columbia waters (Puget Sound, the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the southern Strait of Georgia). Along the north Pacific coast, resident killer whales occur from Oregon and Washington to the Bering Sea. In the Pacific Northwest, the two closest resident killer whale communities (groups of pods that share a common home range), are the southern residents – the ones petitioned for protection – and the northern residents, which live in northern British Columbia and southeast Alaska.

Where do the southern resident killer whales go when they are not in Puget Sound?

Most of the information we have about southern resident killer whales has been collected in Puget Sound during the summer months. Very little is known about their movements or feeding areas during the winter. In 1999, for the first time, scientists observed resident whales from Puget Sound as far south as Monterey, California.

How many southern resident killer whales are there?

As far as we know, the number of southern resident killer whales has never been large, perhaps numbering between 100 and 200 before 1960. Live captures of whales from the southern resident community, for the public display industry, reduced the number to fewer than 70 in 1973, when an annual killer whale census of the population began. The 2001 census counted 78 southern residents. This is lower than the 2000 census and a continuation of a downward trend that began in 1996 when 97 whales were counted. There is no comprehensive world-wide estimate of the total number of killer whales.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PETITION AND THE PROCESS

What is the Petition to List Southern Resident Killer as Endangered under the Endangered Species Act ?

The petition is essentially a request for the government to conduct the necessary studies and reviews to determine whether southern resident killer whales can be considered a species, as defined in the ESA, and whether human-caused threats to the population warrant the additional protection of listing them as threatened or endangered. Although killer whales everywhere are part of the same species, the ESA allows for a species to be broken down into distinct population segments (DPS) when considering listing. Up until now, the distinct population segment criteria have never been applied to killer whales.

What will happen now that the petition has been accepted?

The National Marine Fisheries Service will publish a notice in the Federal Register announcing acceptance of the petition on or about Aug. 8, and requesting information from the public. Acceptance of the petition means that NMFS believes there is substantial information presented in the petition to warrant a listing. Acceptance does *not* mean that listing is automatic, or that NMFS has accepted the arguments presented in the petition as appropriate in the context of the ESA. Next, NMFS will name a biological review team (BRT) to compile and review all of the available information, including comments and data received from the public.

Who is on the biological review team and what will it do?

The BRT is composed of agency scientists from a variety of disciplines who will try to answer a number of key questions including: 1) What constitutes a DPS of killer whales? 2) Are southern resident killer whales a DPS themselves or part of a larger DPS? 3) If the southern resident DPS is declining, is it threatened or endangered, according to the definitions of the ESA? 4) If it is threatened or endangered, what attributes of its habitat are critical to its continued survival? 5) What factors are contributing to the decline? 6) If factors contributing to the decline can be identified, are there regulatory mechanisms in place to address those factors and mitigate or reverse their adverse effects?

Will there be any chance for non-agency experts to review and comment on the findings of the BRT?

Yes. In the Federal Register notice, NMFS solicited recommendations for independent peer reviewers who will review the findings of the BRT in the event the agency later proposes to list these killer whales.

How long will the BRT review take?

The ESA provides one year from the date the petition was received (May 2, 2002) to complete the review process and for the agency to publish its findings and its decision on whether or not to propose listing of southern resident killer whales.

If the agency proposed to list southern residents, what will happen next?

There would be even greater examination of many of the factors originally examined by the BRT, plus a series of public hearings at which the public could not only contribute information but voice their opinion about the advisability of a listing under the Endangered Species Act. A year from the date of the proposal and typically two years from the date the petition was received in this case May 2, 2003 -- NMFS would make a final decision on a formal listing under the ESA. However, the ESA allows for a six-month extension of the two-year finding if there are areas of substantial scientific disagreement.